



June 17, 2021

### **Sunapee School District's Written Testimony**

To: The Senate Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Spending Oversight

On October 21, 2019, after returning to work from a New Hampshire fall weekend, I received a call upon entering the District's office from the Director of Technology. He informed me that all our servers, documents and internal information structures had been locked down by an entity outside the District and that we were being asked to pay ransom for its release.

Sunapee is a small district in the western part of the state with 430 students (PreK-12) and 120 faculty/staff. The IT Department consists of one full time director and a technician who works 15 hours a week. Neither employee had the professional experience to prepare them to deal with or fully understand what had just happened.

We quickly called the local police department, state police, and our insurance carrier. Our first concern was for personally attributable student and staff information such as social security numbers, DOB and bank account information, but we had no immediate way to determine if that had been breached. Moving quickly, Primex, our local municipality insurance carrier, stepped in and put us in contact with professionals in computer forensics, data loss lawyers and computer specialists. With their assistance, we recognized that this was a ransom threat and determined that no data was taken but rather we were just blocked from accessing it. As this was going on, our focus quickly shifted towards the education of our students, and we began working with teachers to prepare them for what would turn out to be nine days without much of the technology they had become accustomed to using each day.

Working with our professional consultants, we made a determination that we could use our system backups done the Saturday prior. My 1.3-person tech department worked night and day to determine if any individual teacher or student machines may have been infected, removed and replaced servers and hard drives, made copies of our back up, and worked step by step through procedures while also trying to support the educational processes that needed to continue each school day.

At the conclusion of the nine days, we had accumulated fees, materials, and hardware totaling more than \$40,000. This figure did not include the staff hours from our IT staff or the time teachers spent to recreate any content that may have been lost. While much of this was covered by our insurance carrier, the work completed and lost by district personnel was immeasurable. We were ultimately very fortunate, but the incident was not without cost.

Our primary goal in public schools is to provide educational opportunities for our students, and today so much of how we educate interacts with technology. Yet technology is still looked upon as a "set aside" department in most schools, as a place to reset your password when you forget it.

The overall budget for this District is twelve and a half million dollars a year, with approximately five hundred thousand dedicated to technology each year. In the aftermath of this event, the District invested \$10,000 for a technology audit which was done by an in-state technology company that specializes in IT security and development. We now know that



in an ideal world we should develop better systems to keep us fully protected in a crisis such as to develop a disaster recovery plan, write a business continuity plan, create redundant back-up systems that are offsite, enable multifactor authentication and train staff how to use it, run phishing drills to help educate students/staff on outside threats, and think about installing a dry sprinkler system in all IT closets holding technology equipment.

The audit also identified the need for additional support in our IT department. Our 1.3-person department works very hard each day to ensure that devices are in-hand, accessibility to needed information is available, equipment is ordered and repaired as needed, and helpdesk tickets are completed. The ability to research new technology and upgrade infrastructure systems is simply not possible given the capacity of the current staff. To add an additional full time person with benefits to our IT department would impact the budget by about 1 percent.

As a member of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and after completing their national certification program in February, 2020, I had the opportunity to discuss IT security with 20 colleagues from across our country. The cohort consisted of superintendents from districts in California, Pennsylvania, Chicago, Virginia, and others. Sunapee represented the smallest district in that cohort. When reviewing our situation with the cohort, it became very clear that no one felt that IT security was at a level to prevent this from happening in their district.

The State of New Hampshire receives federal monies under Title IV that are meant to help districts address providing technology for all, training and other creative initiatives. In New Hampshire, depending on the size and other aspects of a district, allocations can be between \$10,000 and \$30,000. Districts are required to propose projects for the expenditure of the funds and then must receive state approval before spending. While this sounds like a great support, unfortunately, only 15% of this grant can be spent on equipment or infrastructure. These allocations could be so much more beneficial to all districts if they could be used to invest in audits and to upgrade or enhance hardware to use cloud-based systems that would greatly improve IT data security in our schools.

Many school districts in New Hampshire have understaffed IT departments consisting of two or three full-time or part-time people. Given the rate that technology is changing and the amount of devices that are used to support education, they do not have the time to protect these systems as needed.

Thank you for asking me to speak with the Senate Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Spending Oversight, and thank you to Senator Hassan for representing the state of New Hampshire by bringing this important topic to light.

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